

Not only did the Wilmington Chamber of Commerce work to ensure the hiring of whites and the firing of blacks, but others in the state watched the labor movement in Wilmington closely. Newspapers reported that the Union had secured permanent jobs for over 60 white men and anticipated placing many more with leading manufacturers in the city. Across the board, blacks saw themselves replaced by white workers, many of whom agreed to do “disagreeable and arduous work.” White laborers streamed into the city from the countryside, motivated in part by sinking prices for farm products. To promote white employment, the newspapers promised to print the names of white workers and their fields to assist employers who needed mechanics, draymen, masons, carpenters, and other skilled workers.⁹⁷

Among the jobs dominated by African American labor before November 1898 were stevedores, dock workers who loaded and off-loaded goods between ships and warehouses along the shore. Beginning in 1891, stevedores had to register and post a bond to operate. Typically, there was a “boss” stevedore who organized several other men under his supervision. One of the requirements placed upon the bosses was the obligation to promptly handle contracts and

to pay employees accordingly. Between 1891 and 1898, of the stevedore bonds issued, seven were issued for whites and three for blacks. One of the black firms was Waddell and Newkirk, operated by Cato Waddell and Thomas Newkirk. Another was operated by Andrew J. Walker and Charles Forman. The black firm with the most staying power was Lee, Starnes, and Company, operated by Joseph Starnes, Major Lee, Fred Williams, and John Turner. Joseph McFarland and Henry Robinson joined the operation in 1895. Lee, Starnes, and Company must have been one of the more organized and profitable stevedore companies because, in 1898, two of its African American principals, Major Lee and Henry Robinson, partnered with two whites, J. W. H. Fuchs and W. W. Harriss, to establish the Wilmington Stevedore Company. The Wilmington Stevedore Company soon became the major source for stevedore labor. By 1900, the Wilmington Stevedore Company was an altogether white operation with no mention of either Lee or Robinson.⁹⁸

Not all employers abandoned their black laborers in the face of the pressures of the White Labor Movement. James Sprunt maintained his practice of hiring black workers at his cotton compress. Within three days of the riot, his businesses were again operating and ships were coming into port. Newspapers made a point to show that the city and its businesses were recuperating from the riot. However, all was not well in the shipping businesses since many African American draymen still had not returned to work. This point was particularly troublesome for Sprunt and his compress because Sprunt faced immediate financial loss if his crews could not off-load ships waiting at anchor. On November 13 it was reported that Sprunt

November 21, 1898; *Wilmington Messenger*, February 7, March 5, 7, 1899.

⁹⁷ “If Wilmington shall find that white labor can be successfully substituted for colored, other towns will not be slow to follow her lead.” The paper also noted that the topic was of statewide interest to blacks and whites alike. A brief complaint was made in the *Messenger* when it was discovered that an all-black crew led by a black foreman had secured a contract to tear down an old building on Front Street when white workers were available. Further analysis of the changes in the labor market for African Americans can be found in Chapter 8 and Appendix N. *News and Observer* (Raleigh), December 15, 1898; *Morning Star* (Wilmington), February 3, 1898; *Wilmington Messenger*, February 21, March 18, 1899.

⁹⁸ New Hanover County Official’s Bonds, State Archives, Office of Archives and History, Raleigh.